

CLEMENT MOORE'S VOCATION.

by THE AUTHOR OF "THE SECOND LIFE."

From the time Clement Moore put off short dresses and pantalettes, she was set apart by her family as a genius—a genius and eccentric! She was still young, only about seventeen, when she began, as her maiden aunt expressed it, to carve out her own life; that is to say, she came to the town of Carrville, took boarding with this aforesaid aunt, converted a little shanty in the garden into a studio, and there moulded in clay and painted in oils.

There were other traits, which to women who have always run in the New York, or Philadelphia grooves, might set her apart as more noticeable than these. She could not but see for herself that she was unlike all other women that she had known. There were passions, trances, which it shamed and cowed her to name, so different were they from the thoughts of those around her. Joys and pains unutterable throbbed in her blood and racked her brain alternately; and in these joys and pains, no one, of all those she knew, could sympathize. They came to her in music, or at the sudden sight of a beautiful landscape, or through the hearing of a noble word or deed. Could she but make real these vague dreams; could she but create the beauty that moved and pained her so—give to the world something to make it glad that she had lived! The girl was wretched, or in ecstasy, by turns. Today, her models and her pictures were lumps of clay, or meaningless daubs of paint to her; tomorrow, she could discern faint flashes of the infinite beauty gleaming through them. In her former mood, in her fits of self-abasement her manner was haughty sullen, defiant; but in these later moods, and when sure of her God-given power, no one could be more winning or humble.

Clement was only seventeen, but she was older in some respects, and had a fuller career to look back upon than many a woman of twenty-five. There were one or two trunks full of love-letters and billet-deux in the back part of her studio; there was a disorderly mass of ball-dresses, all ripped and soiled, relics of two winters campaign in the capital. Her

flirting and waltzing had been fast and furious. "One must press the grape hard to know what the juice is worth," she was wont to say. But all this was passed and gone. She lived now as recluse as a nun.

When she walked up the village street, the women passed her superciliously. Whether she danced, painted, or studied book-keeping, her red-hot energy made her intolerable and aggressive to others of her sex. "She was like an engine," the girls said, "with a full head of steam on and the valves down." The men, on the contrary, found her exhilarating; perhaps, because they admired the moulding and pose of the large, almost majestic figure; and found mellow tints and effects which they liked in her warm skin and jet black eyes.

At the door of her studio, one evening, a man sat waiting for her. There was a wooden bench on either side of the broad, flag-stone. The afternoon sun shone on it pleasantly, and a great, black walnut rustled overhead. The man, who rose to meet her, toned in well with the rich, warm picture. Clement's artist eye contracted, as it did when it was satisfied.

"Sit down, sit down, colonel," she said. "It is a relief to look at you, after three months' experience of the men here."

"They are not of your kin nor kind? I am glad, my darling." He spoke with luscious tenderness of manner.

She paused a moment; then answered, "They're lean and sallow as a rule, that is what I mean. It may be that their lineage is more scholarly than ours, or it may be the limestone water here about—I don't know."

Col. Ashby laughed, and seated himself opposite to her on the bench, the gold head of his cane to his lips, looking critically at her.

Her whims of speech never broke the summer calm of his temper. He was of a different type from the cold, careful-mannered men of Carrville. Young; with a florid, altogether masculine beauty; with easy, careless dress and manners; a good-humored smile; military walk and whiskers; thin, red skin, that hinted at choice wines in his cellar; and the air of one

accustomed to command, and to give favors—Col. Ashby, the representative of one of the oldest families of Kentucky, rich, popular, a Congressman, who, young as he was, carried weight —this was exactly the man, one would have thought, to become Clement Moore's husband. Their world had said so long ago, at any rate; and his manner said so now, with the least bit, perhaps, of offensive fervor.

He put it into words presently:

"You know why I have come, Clement?"

"Yes."

"You are my betrothed wife. For three months I have not heard of, nor from you. Even your eccentricity must have its limit."

She laughed. "I believe your good-humor has none," she said. Then she grew violently hot, and sat silent.

He would not speak, but waited.

"I knew this day would come," she said, at last. "Give me an hour to myself, and you shall have my answer. No! Not a word!" lifting her hand when he began to speak.

"Nothing you can say will plead for you as my own heart does."

Clement rose, as he spoke, and walked with him to the gate, her hat in her hand, her black hair uncoiled, as usual, and hanging untidily down her neck, keeping step with his long strides. Ashby noted the mannishness and untidiness with annoyance. But would right itself, he thought; she was a grand creature, physically, and her blood was good. None better! He was very fond of Clement, as he knew her.

"Where do you stop?" she said; for they chatted as they went, as one man would with another.

"With Shober, the judge. You know him?"

"Yes, I know him," her eyes losing expression. They lightened or dimmed, as she talked, with her passions, like a bird's or a dog's. "I hate the man."

"Yes. Shober was born antagonistic to you, Clement. I fancy he was sour, ascetic, cold in his cradle. Women can't like such men. Marriage was a mistake for him: and those four, uncouth, gangling boys live to prove it. It is a dreary house."

"It is a dreary bouse! The air is like a burying vault."

When Ashby had left her, he smiled at her vehemence. If she should carry that heat into her love for him!

Clement, when alone, locked her door, pushed the chairs out of her way, and seated herself heavily on the floor to think. Could she marry George Ashby? Once, she had thought she loved him. But she was younger then. She feared now that she loved her art more. And yet a home, husband, children: she thought of it all. Custom (an iron code for most women) had its weight. All Kentucky girls of good family became engaged, and married.

On the other hand, any home, even the magnificence of George Ashby's, would, she knew, be but a jail for her. As for children, they were nothing to her but annoying animals. And, her art? She looked about her. Yet what was here that she should unwomanize herself for the love of it? People began already to stand off from her: it would not be long before she would be left alone—alone! And, perhaps, after all, her art would come to nothing.

She sat a good while with her chin in her hand, the tears oozing into her large, black eyes. Then she thought of her art again. She got up, going from picture to bust, touching one now and then, even kissing them, exactly as a mother would her children. They were the only things which had ever wakened the mother-instinct in her. Her mind was made up.

She would not marry, she would live for her art.

She went out of the room, just when the pleasant evening light was changing into melancholy shadows, looking tired and faded. There were no such things as calm emotions to this girl, nor trifles; they were all matters of life and death to her.

She met George Ashby outside, and told him what she had resolved. "I shall live for my art," she said. "I think God has given me a talent, and I will not bury it in the earth."

There was honest love on Ashby's side, so far as his nature was capable of it, but he bore his disappointment like the manly fellow that he was.

"I suppose you are right, Clement," he said bravely. "You're always right. It don't matter about me. I never knew a woman who was so fit to stand alone as you."

When he was gone, she went back and worked all night. She thought the trial of her life was past; the pain of it came afterward, perhaps.

A year or two went by. The people of Carrville saw little of Clement. No day-laborer worked harder than she. She painted steadily. "If it is to be my work for life, I must be an apprentice, not an amateur," she said, and began with the rudiments again.

I remember how we children used to hurry to one side as we met her on our way to school; how big and awkward she seemed, sweeping along with her voluminous skirt, and man's corduroy sacque; so blind to all about her, that she walked over, or literally upset us sometimes, picking us up with a "Lord bless me!" and gur-r of a laugh, in her rich, but unmodulated voice. Yet we always felt oddly akin to her; probably from her overgrown, unfinished look and manner, like a child suddenly developed into a woman.

She grew very pale and thin before the second winter was over, but remained always just as headlong and good-humored. Then a rumor came that a picture, or sketch, she had made, had been sent to her uncle in Baltimore, and by him submitted to some foreign artist, at that time

visiting the States: who I do not know; but the authority was high and decisive. He thought the picture worth notice; so much, indeed, that he determined in his tour through the States to go down to Carrville to meet the young aspirant, and decide what course would be best for her, and whether her promise of power would warrant her giving up her life to the profession. Her uncle, old Dr. Cranmer, accompanied him, and brought him, when they arrived at Carrville, straight to Judge Shober, who had been a pupil of the doctor's in his youth.

They came at night. Early the next morning I saw Clement going up to the judge's— a bald, staring, brick house in the midst of an acre of ground. She looked sallow and ill; wore her corduroy sacque, (I noticed that) and a brown silk skirt, with one or two tears in it, stitched with white thread. Her portfolio had been sent on before. She had a long interview with her uncle and the artist; the carriage waiting at the door, meanwhile, to take the latter to the train.

Everybody in the village, in some way knew that her fate was to be decided in that hour; and when the two men came out, stepped into the carriage, and were driven off, we looked after the dust of their wheels with an awestruck wonder. Art and its mysteries belonged to a world so far away from ours!

It was a bright morning in May. The sunshine fell pleasantly through the dusty, uncurtained window of the judge's parlor, where Clement stood—but it was all that was pleasant in the room—the ceiling was high, the room wide; but they offered only a larger-field for the dirt and discomfort. The wall-paper was stained, the paint yellow, the carpet ragged; two or three chairs, and a stiff sofa, covered with haircloth, with the stuffing oozing out at every corner, were ranged about a square mahogany table, greasy and inky, on which lay her portfolio. There were some bookshelves, piles of newspapers, and a pair of muddy shoes on the mantle-shelf, between two vases of dirty wax-flowers. A rocking-chair, with a broken cane-seat, rocked to and fro, some one having touched it; and it gave a forlorn life to the scene. Outside was the square acre of ground, surrounded by a high, broad fence, the grass trying vainly to force its way through the clay; a heap of ashes in one corner. House and lot were the dreary camping-ground where Judge Shober, and his four

sons, had lived, for the last fifteen years, without a woman to make it a home.

The door behind Clement opened, and Judge Shober came in. He went straight to the window and stood beside her, quite silent, looking out at the trodden clay and ash-heap. A tall, hardworked-looking man, with a singularly cold, staid manner.

"Have you nothing to tell me, Miss Moore?" he said, at last, speaking as a teacher might to a pupil.

Clement went to the table and took up her sketches. One might have fancied she meant, in some way, to protect herself against him by them.

"It is all over," she said.

"How?"

"I am to go to Rome. He promises me his aid there, and friends."

"Nothing more?"

"Success!"

The triumph that rose into her face, as she said this, spiritualized it, for the moment, and made it beautiful. He was silent, looking at her with a smile that grew each moment more cynical and bitter.

"In a word, you subjected yourself to this fellow to be weighed and judged for life; and after a quarter of an hour's inspection, he records his verdict as final, I have known you for years. I tell you that these pictures," laying his hand on them gravely, "are worthless— worthless."

"So did he."

"I tell you," angry heat rising in his thin face, "that they are crude, faulty in execution, and the idea tawdry."

"He saw it all. He was more savage in his criticism than you!

She waited for him to speak, but he stood looking at her with the same absorbing cold eyes. Her own rested on them some secret-meaning passing between them with an electric flash. Whatever it was, it shook her as with a spasm of pain. She crumpled the papers up slowly in her large hands, as they lay on the table.

"No, not so cruel as you," she said, quietly. "He tells me that I have power. God did not make a mistake when he made me. This man gives me a chance for happiness and fame. But you..."

"I? Well, what have I given you?"

She wiped the cold sweat from her forehead. When she spoke, her voice scarcely rose above a whisper.

"You have weighed me in your balance for years, and found me wanting. I dare to speak the truth to you at last. You have been kind to me; in your pity you have given me advice and friendship, as you gave a crust of dry bread to the beggar at your gate. Pity!" She spoke with intense scorn. "I know what I am in your eyes."

"What are you?"

"A poor creature," rising now to headlong passion. "A poor attempt of Nature that has failed; with neither the attractive body a woman, nor the mind of a man. Oh!" she suddenly sobbed, throwing her hands up over her face. "Do you think I do not know what I am!"

He made a step toward her, and then drew back into the recess of the window, and stood silent until her passion had sobbed itself quiet. The atmosphere of dead coldness about him had long maddened the girl with what she called hate. To him she was apparently always a child, always faulty, worthy of pity.

No one in the world was barred from her by distance so impregnable. And yet...

One time, long ago, when he had touched her hand, once when she had found his eyes fixed on her in a crowd, no one in the world had seemed so near. She had been mad—mad enough to see a real man concealed behind the quiet cynic, and to fancy that she first had discovered, and known him. If these passionate dreams came back to her now, his cool, common sense speedily banished them.

"Miss Moore!"

She dried her eyes hastily with sudden shame. To everybody else she was "Clement," to be loved, laughed at, disliked; to him she was "Miss Moore," in utter indifference. His wife had always been to him only Mrs. Shober.

"You forget the difference there is between us, when you accuse me so bitterly," he went on, speaking in his calmest, most dispassionate manner. "you are young, wealthy;" he hesitated;, "other men have found you fair. You have a brilliant path before you. I did but jest when I questioned this stranger's verdict I knew it to be just. Few women have as great strength given to them, or see as clearly how to use it."

Clement was as calm as he, as she answered, "You have drawn my life—now for your own?"

"It is patent to all men," he answered, hastily. "A man, old enough to be your father; a poor lawyer, in a poor village; for my sole duty and ambition, four sons to clothe, feed, and rear into the image of God as best I can. If life brings to you tropic fruits, she has begrudged me even the dry husks," and he ended with a bitter laugh.

Clement buttoned corduroy coat, leisurely, before she answered him. But her fingers, which he watched with eager eyes, shook.

"Life gives us what food we choose," she said. "You offer to your friends and neighbors the dry husks, and they give them to you in exchange. You have their respect. But you are a man with whom no man, and certainly no woman, has ever walked in company."

He made no reply. He turned and looked quietly out at the sun shining on the clay-yard and ashes. When she was ready to go, he opened the door for her, following her through the ante-room into the broad hall, and out on the porch.

The house had been stately in its day—now it was shabby, commonplace, and vulgar. His boys came in from school, awkward, overgrown fellows, with cowed, slouching glances at their father as they passed him, which betrayed how stern his rule was. The eldest was about Clement's age; a warm throb came into her heart for them, perhaps some feeling which would have spent itself elsewhere, if it had not been thrust back and stifled. She would like to be a chum of theirs, she thought; a good fellow in company. They had never, known a mother, never been petted, or loved. A sudden blush dyed her face. Oddly enough she was conscious, for the first time today, of her unclean, slovenly dress.

John Shober looked after his boys with a sorrowful tenderness, which Clement was sure he had never suffered them to see. But he said nothing. He stopped at the gate and held it open for her, standing bareheaded; the wind blew back his hair. She looked beyond him, through the gate to the barren yard and dreary house, from which came the sound of the boys squabbling.

He read her thoughts. "In Rome," he said, "there is beauty, the work for which you were born—and success. Your way lies there; here is mine."

Clement Moore went back to her studio and began to work with feverish energy. Before sundown pictures, sketches, outline-books, were ashes alike, in the grate. "He called them worthless. I will do something worthy of his praise," she said, forcing back the tears. She packed her clothes, for she meant now to leave Carrville the next morning, although the friend whom she would accompany to Italy would not sail for a month.

"What does this haste mean, Clement?" said her aunt, standing aghast. "You had no thought this morning of going tomorrow."

"No. But I cannot in Carrville. I must burn my ships behind me."

Clement's words were usually enigmas to the old lady; she asked no explanation. When the little house, in which she had been so happy, was dismantled, she went into the woods beyond the meadow, and sat down by the creek.

She had pushed her corduroy sacque and torn skirt into the fire with as vehement haste as though they had been living things which had injured her. "Other men did think me fair," she had said again and again to herself; and she had chosen out a dress of some maroon-colored, gauzy fabric, which some one had told her once was becoming to her. "But it's too late," she said, with dry eyes. "I have been blind, blind." She put on the dress, however, and her large arms and shoulders gleamed white under it as through brown vapor. Her hair, yet wet and curly from the bath, she had up in a heavy knot.

She could have cried for herself as she sat there. This little effort to be like other women seemed so pitiful to her, and so vain.

The evening grew late; the reddish color of the sky began to purple overhead; the midges thickened in the air, about the dark, sedgey banks of the creek beside her. From the village came the slow tolling of the sundown bell. The trunks of the trees were in shadow, but the branches a-top rustled green and glistening in the sunset. Clement was quite alone. She was going in the morning forever, yet nobody cared to stay with her to say good-by. Yet she was an honest creature, full of common sense, wholesome, genuine to the core; there was not an atom of sham, of caprice, of ill-nature in her; no mean little traits morticing the larger ones.

Perhaps she felt her desertion. It costs the strongest woman a wrench at heart to be alone. It may have been that which brought the strange look into her face, which never had been there before. "It is not my fault," she whispered to herself.

Presently she got up and turned through the woods homeward, crunching the bushes beneath her heavy steps. Suddenly she saw John

Shober before her. He was on his way from the village, and had taken this short cut through the woods. He stood still. She stopped a moment, and then went on. Why should she not meet him? They were strangers, as they had always been.

"You are going in the morning, Miss Moore?" he said, with a smile of apparent satisfaction.

"Yes."

"Then I can bid you farewell now?"

He came up to her close, closer, and, for the second time in his life, took her hand in his.

"Good-by," she said.

"Good-by." But he held her still, looking in her eyes steadily. "You told me," he said, "that I gave you advice and friendship. You were right. Nothing more, Clement," dropping her hand. "Nothing more."

"What more?" she cried.

"Shall I tell you?" turning on her. "Did I ever mean to tell you? Do you think I was mad enough to ask a beautiful, brilliant girl, who might be my daughter, to come into that filthy den yonder, to spend her life in kitchen and housework, and slaving for my boys, because I have been fool enough to love her? No. I am a middle-aged man. I have learned common sense. I am a boy no longer." He stood motionless, and did not let her go. "But, oh! my darling, I have loved you so long!" he cried, with a sudden outburst; and somehow his arms were about her, and her warm mouth was pressed to his, which is hardly the course which common sense would have advised in such a case.

He pushed her from him at last.

"God forgive me. I never meant to trouble you. Go now."

"But if I do not want to go?" whispered Clement." The unmodulated voice was suddenly grown sweet with joy and pathos.

His passionate frenzy was over, and he was himself again—a man who knew the world, and looked at it in a stern and matter-of-fact fashion. He held his love, and this one Chance of great happiness away from him, and viewed it in the same way. Yet he trembled, in his forced coolness.

"You do not know what you say. You are but a child. People would say I had cheated you into marriage in your ignorance. I am a poor man, Clement, you are wealthy."

She nodded.

"My wife's life would be a hard one. My first duty is to my boys, and she should not tempt me from it."

"I don't think you know your duty to your boys," in a whisper.

"Eh? I do not hear you. Do not jest, girl! This is no light matter to me. You said no woman ever had loved me; you spoke the truth ; more bitterly than you knew. My wife loved another man. She is dead now. But I have been alone—alone always. I thought God made you for me. But I do not forget circumstances; I am not mad."

Clement kept one hand on his arm. Her eyes sparkled with tears and mischief. "One does not wish to plead one's cause too hotly," she said, with a shy blush.

But Shober did not smile. "I do not fear the world," he cried. "But some day you may say that my passion hurried you to your ruin. You have been called to a great work, your art..."

"I think I see my work," she said, gently. "Let us walk on and talk the matter over."

One knows the end of all such reasonable conferences. Let us be rational as we will about the work of woman, and the fields suited for that

work, but when love comes in, the best laid schemes will "gang aft agley."

Of course, Clement married John Shober, and to this hour has never seen Rome. But she has had no time, I fancy, to fold any of her talents comfortably away in a napkin. I remember the Shober house, a few years after she entered it; especially the ground which was added to it, and which blossomed into the quaintest oddest fashioned of orchards and gardens. There were always the shadiest walks, the crimsonest plum-trees, and absolute thickets of roses. You generally met two or three toddling babies there—for Clement was the doting mother of half a dozen. It was the happiest house to visit in, the young people all said—and everybody visited there. The missing link, which was needed to fasten Clement to her human brothers and sisters came to her through her husband. There was no half-way measures with her, as you know. She was energetically loveable, the prudentest wife, the merriest, most tender mother, the most tactful friend. The boys, growing up to be young men, were never tired of bringing their school-mates to the house to introduce them to "mother," who had jolly little suppers for them, tableaux, charades, sudden picnics, which were something to remember for life.

John Shober grew almost into a genial companion and active citizen after a few years of the dew and sunshine of his new life. But he never was popular as his wife was. He lived behind her, as it were; put her between himself and the outside world, showed his secret self only to her eye.

But what did Clement do? She had been called to so high a mission, somebody questions. Did she teach her babies merely to make kites, and dress dolls?

I am afraid she spent a good deal of time at just such work. But she did something more, taught the Shober boys Latin and drawing—fitted Ben for college, in fact. They have grown up manly, high-bred fellows, with a curious reverence for God and women, which, I think, was one of Clement's old-fashioned, chivalric notions, with which she inoculated them. When her husband died she managed the estate herself, planted and ploughed, sold and bought. "No work is unwomanly, if one is a true

woman," she said.

She is content now with the work her daughters give her: they have no nearer friend than she. They suffer in comparison with her too; for she is one of the fairest, most loveable, attractive, yet stately of matrons; her rare sense of color always shown in her beautiful dress. Now and then, a genial bit of brusquerie breaks out, and shows the old Clement.

"But your art?" was said to her, one day. "The talent was buried, after all."

Her face shone suddenly,

"My Alice has it all," putting her hand on a little fair head beside her. "It is better so. I had other work to do."



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